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FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5580
INFO RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 6798
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 5641
RUEHBS/AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS PRIORITY 0517
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 1342
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ PRIORITY 2198
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 0444
RUEHLI/AMEMBASSY LISBON PRIORITY 1439
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0563
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID PRIORITY 3159
RUEHMU/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA PRIORITY 1359
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO PRIORITY 3905
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0478
RUEHQD/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 2282
RUEHSN/AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR PRIORITY 0935
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO PRIORITY 3645
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE PRIORITY 1063
RUEHAO/AMCONSUL CURACAO PRIORITY 0905
RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL PRIORITY 0556
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0383
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA PRIORITY 0872

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 002183

SIPDIS

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HQSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD
DEPT PASS TO AID/OTI RPORTER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/21/2016

TAGS: PGOV KDEM VE

SUBJECT: TEODORO PETKOFF'S PRESIDENTIAL BID MAY BE RUNNING
OUT OF STEAM

REF: A. CARACAS 01997

1B. CARACAS 02141
1C. CARACAS 01665

Classified By: ACTING DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION ROBERT R. DOWNES FOR REAS
ON 1.4 (D)

Summary

1. (C) PolCouns met with opposition presidential candidate Teodoro Petkoff's campaign manager Francisco Layrisse July 12 to discuss the campaign's progress and the recent rift between Petkoff, Sumate, and other leading contenders, Julio Borges and Governor Manuel Rosales, over the primary to choose a unified opposition candidate. Although Petkoff entered the race with expectations that he would pose a significant challenge to President Chavez, he has failed to connect with voters, and is struggling to find funds and signatures to support his campaign as an independent. His campaign team realizes Petkoff's strident response to the primaries did not enhance his electoral prospects, and is working to mend relations with the other two candidates. Still, his apparent intention to remain in the race regardless of the electoral conditions set by the National Electoral Council is likely to alienate more voters and lend credence to rumors that Chavez is paying him to run in the December 3 election to legitimize his victory. End Summary.

Long Road to the Presidential Campaign

¶2. (C) PolCouns met with Teodoro Petkoff's campaign manager Francisco Layrisse July 12 to discuss the campaign's progress and the recent public disagreement between Petkoff, Julio Borges, Governor Manuel Rosales, and Sumate over the primary to choose a unified opposition candidate. When Petkoff entered the presidential race in April, many thought his previous government experience and burnished leftist credentials would present a serious challenge to President Chavez. Although still considered to be a leading opposition candidate, along with Borges and Rosales, Petkoff has failed to connect with voters and rarely polls higher than 10 percent.

Money Woes

¶3. (C) Petkoff's campaign, like those of other opposition presidential candidates, is apparently severely cash-strapped. Layrisse told PolCouns the campaign could fold if they do not get money in the next 45 days. He said potential Venezuelan donors fear government retaliation should they be discovered supporting the opposition and are only giving small cash donations. Petkoff has met with leftist party contacts in Europe and Latin America, but Layrisse lamented that these trips were not bearing much financial fruit. They are now reaching out to the Soros Foundation. He also noted that the Spanish have been helpful in quietly pressing the BRV to grant more transparent conditions.

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No Electoral Prospects

¶4. (C) Acknowledging Chavez' electoral invincibility, Layrisse said their goal was not to win the election, but to help unite the 30-45 percent of the electorate that they calculate is either opposed to or disenchanted with Chavismo. However, the same fear that has prevented people from giving money has also slowed Petkoff's efforts to collect the 170,000 signatures (one percent of the electorate) required to register as an independent candidate. Despite the candidate's low polling figures, Layrisse noted the campaign has offices in every state and almost every municipality in Caracas. He also has support from all of the "micro-parties" (NFI). Money permitting, Layrisse thought they would get the required signatures in the weeks leading up to the August 5-25 candidate registration period.

Not Playing Well With Others

¶5. (C) Despite his goal, the candidate appears to have done more dividing than uniting lately with his vehement rejection of the Sumate-backed primary scheduled for August 13 (refs a and b). The campaign team privately acknowledges the response to the primary hurt the opposition's cause writ large and lamented that the issue caused even more divisions. Layrisse was clear, however, that they believe the primary is a bad idea and that Petkoff will not participate. Interestingly, he claimed that neither Sumate, Borges, nor Rosales really wanted the primary, but their public positions have locked them into participating. Layrisse said the accord signed by the three leading opposition candidates in June (ref c) was practically dead, and relations colored with distrust. Petkoff felt betrayed by the other two candidates' decision to participate in the primary, and both he and Borges are frustrated with Rosales' indecision on whether to run for president. However, Layrisse said the three do talk on the phone regularly and are working to smooth over their differences. In addition, Layrisse hopes to restore

relations and initiate regular meetings between representatives of each candidate's camp to maintain as strong a front as possible against Chavez, electoral manipulations.

But In For the Long Haul-- Money Permitting

¶6. (C) Divisions will likely continue if--money and signatures permitting--Petkoff sees the race to the end, as planned. Unless there is an overwhelming turnout for the primary and the vote results in a clear winner, Layrisse said Petkoff will not withdraw his candidacy. He indicated a turnout of over one million would constitute a successful primary. Moreover, Petkoff believes that participating in the December 3 election gives the opposition more credibility in denouncing irregularities. When pressed, however, Layrisse conceded the candidate might reconsider if opposition rank-and-file see little prospect for a fair vote and push for the candidate's withdrawal as occurred in the 2005 legislative election.

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Comment

¶7. (C) Petkoff's campaign is emblematic of the opposition's general plight, competing for scarce resources and votes from those few voters willing to openly support the opposition cause. To be sure, neither Petkoff, nor the opposition in general, is helping their cause by pursuing the same single-minded, self-interested strategies that have contributed to consecutive electoral losses. We can't really assess the extent or seriousness of his financial problems. However, it is unlikely that Petkoff's candidacy--if it survives its current money troubles--will seriously impact the opposition's electoral fortunes. His determination to stay in the race will probably cause his popularity to fall even more as opposition supporters will probably increasingly buy into circulating rumors that he is being paid to run to legitimize Chavez' victory.

BROWNFIELD